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President Carter 'ordered killing of Somoza' claim

By IAN HENRY *Old Bailey Correspondent*

JOHN BANKS, the mercenary recruiting agent, said at the Old Bailey yesterday he had been told that President Carter had personally ordered the assassination of President Somoza of Nicaragua.

He claimed he was part of a CIA-backed "hit team."

But the team got cold feet over the assassination and decided to "blow the operation."

Banks, 35, who is accused of blackmailing the Somoza regime for \$250,000 (about £104,000) said he was one of six British and American men hired as assassins by a CIA man, Col Frank Sturgess.

Sturgess, who, he said, was involved in the Watergate scandal and was the alleged third man in the President Kennedy assassination, had told him the order for the assassination of Somoza had come from Mr Carter and his security advisers.

'Too serious'

Banks said that after seeing Sturgess the six hired men expressed astonishment at the contract and ways were discussed about stopping it because it was regarded as too serious politically and stability-wise to be carried through.

It was agreed, he added, that he should approach the Somoza regime and offer information about the assassination plot in return for \$250,000 and homes and jobs in the main Nicaraguan city of Managua for themselves and their families.

Banks claimed he waited a few days to let the situation sink in and eventually rang the Nicaraguan Embassy in London, but the result was "not very good."

A defence witness, Brig-Gen. Otto LESSING, a retired general in the United States Marine Corps, told the court he had travelled from America to give evidence because "I felt a man of his (Banks's) stature and excellent service to the United States and his country deserved somebody to stand up for him and back him up."

The general recalled a telephone call he received from Banks asking his advice on a "very sensitive matter" in central America.

After Banks had explained the details involving an operation concerning a former head of state, Gen. Lessing said he told Banks he thought it was "frame up." He also considered it was "ridiculous and impossible" that the United States government was involved in the plot.

Banks, of College Road, College Town, Camberley, Surrey, has denied three blackmail charges.

The trial was adjourned until today.